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NEWS JOURNALISM AND THE PRINCIPLES OF OBJECTIVITY

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Mainstream news journalism, especially as it is practiced in the United States and in liberal democracies like it, aspires to achieve objectivity. But it is far from clear what journalistic objectivity is, whether we look to discussions in media studies or to the spirited and ongoing debates among professional journalists about how they ought to conduct themselves. Despite the social prominence of journalism as a profession, philosophers have largely neglected it, offering little attention to journalistic ethics as a whole and to the role of objectivity in this field.[1] This omission is all the more surprising because objectivity is a concept redolent with philosophical significance.

In this article, we argue that the aspiration to objectivity shared by many practitioners of mainstream news journalism is misguided in light of the overarching goals of the practice. These goals include, most prominently, informing citizens about issues of importance to public life and holding those in positions of authority to account. The tension between objectivity as a value and these democratic goals of mainstream news journalism leads to a practical dilemma, which we argue ought to be resolved in favor of pursuing these goals since these goals provide the justification for mainstream news journalism as a social practice. Our analysis of the dilemma that faces mainstream news journalism turns on an account of what journalistic objectivity is. Against other prominent theorists of such objectivity, we construe objectivity as a multifaceted value that generates a plurality of subsidiary principles, which are taught in journalism schools and promoted within mainstream news organizations. Our analysis focuses on the use of this theory by journalists and news organizations working within the

1 One of the few philosophical analyses is the virtue-theoretic analysis of objectivity in White, "Objectivity as a Journalistic Virtue," which has largely been ignored in further work on this topic. The Rawslian public reason approach to objectivity in Fox, "Public Reason, Objectivity, and Journalism in Liberal Democratic Societies," has received some engagement in media studies but little in philosophy. More recently, Stephen Ward has written about the topic in the context of formulating a professional ethics for journalism ("Democratically Engaged Journalism and Extremism").

United States to serve an American audience, because of the American origins of mainstream news journalism (discussed further below in section 1).

Recognizing the limits of objectivity as a master value should lead journalists to concede—and indeed, to affirm—that they are engaged in a type of political activity. Nevertheless, we do not wish to conflate news journalists with activists or partisan politicians, as critics who hold that mainstream news journalism is merely a form of veiled propaganda for social and political elites might allege. Rather, we develop a novel conception of news journalism as a form of democratic political agency that aims to maintain the communicative conditions under which the contestation of partisan political actors may take place. These conditions are not those of a neutral public sphere, however, but instead tied to the specific form of democratic life in which citizens are well positioned to hold the powerful to account and to understand the shape of the society and the world that they inhabit, such that they can participate effectively in political life.

In defending this conception of mainstream news journalism, our aim is to contribute to the emerging subdiscipline of the philosophy of journalism as well as to settle a particular question in journalistic ethics.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We offer in section 1 a brief account of the origins and current practice of mainstream news journalism to situate our analysis of objectivity before turning in section 2 to an account of objectivity as a value and, in section 3, to the way that the dilemma arises from each of three principles that this value generates—namely, the "just the facts" principle, the principle of positional neutrality, and the principle of dispassionate rhetoric. Then, in section 4, we present our alternative view of the practice of journalism as a form of democratic political agency. We defend this view from a series of objections on behalf of proponents of competing accounts of mainstream news journalism in section 5 before offering in a brief conclusion (section 6) broader reflections on the stakes of our discussion of objectivity in journalism and the prospects for a philosophy of journalism.

1. THE ORIGINS AND CURRENT PRACTICE OF MAINSTREAM NEWS JOURNALISM

1.1. The Birth of Mainstream News Journalism Out of the Spirit of Muckraking

Mainstream news journalism as a social practice emerged relatively recently, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries during the transition from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era in US politics.[2] This style

2 The historical analysis in this and the following paragraph draws on Kaplan, "The Origins of Objectivity in American Journalism."

of journalism has since spread from the United States around the world, especially to other societies that espouse liberal democratic values. It is worth noting that a society can have a free press even where mainstream news journalism is absent or is a minority practice. Indeed, mainstream news journalism emerged from the journalistic practices that characterized the partisan American press for most of the nineteenth century, when news organizations were typically affiliated with a particular political party, and no firm distinction was made between reporting on events and providing editorial commentary on them.

By the early part of the twentieth century, however, newspapers and magazines had begun to distance themselves from political parties. At the same time, a new public role for journalism became prominent: holding to account the powerful in government and in private enterprise by exposing corruption, exploitation, and other forms of malfeasance. While the particular Progressive Era reform agenda of the muckrakers eventually faded, the establishment of news organizations that were independent of partisan politics but that still took themselves to have an important role in public life can be identified as the birth of mainstream news journalism as a social practice.

At the inauguration of this practice, we find an authoritative statement of its governing values, still frequently cited today, in Walter Lippmann's *Liberty and the News*, published in 1920. Lippmann argued on the basis of what he saw as the conscription of the press by governments during World War I that "the work of reporters has . . . become confused with the work of preachers, revivalists, prophets and agitators."[3] For Lippmann, journalism had to not only wrest itself free of wartime government control but also adopt "the ideal of objective testimony" that characterizes "the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see what the world really is."[4] Moreover, a free press might be needed by any democratic society, but the sheer complexity of modern society demands "the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues" in reporting.[5] Lippmann thereby established the objective pursuit of truth via a scientific cast of mind as the governing imperative of news journalism.[6] While Lippmann's conceptions of truth and objectivity remain the subject of debate both in academic studies and among professional journalists, it is incontrovertible that his statement of what journalists ought to aspire to in reporting the news became authoritative for practitioners of mainstream news journalism.

3 Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 8.

4 Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 82.

5 Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 82.

6 We return to Lippmann's views in formulating our alternative in section 4 below, drawing on the conception of democratic life held by his interlocutor and opponent John Dewey.

1.2. The Objectivity Wars

Objectivity has been both a standard of evaluation in mainstream news journalism and a subject of controversy since its introduction. The standard has undergone various reckonings, perhaps most prominently regarding mainstream news coverage of McCarthyism in the 1950s. In that case, as historian David Oshinsky notes, principles of objectivity functioned to bar reporters from assessing Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of communism even as they reported them, leading reporters to become "conveyor belt[s] for material," including some of McCarthy's accusations, that they knew to be false.[7] This reckoning led to changes in the practices of news organizations as some pushed for more emphasis on completeness or verification of allegations. However, the pursuit of objectivity continued to define the practice of mainstream news journalism in subsequent decades.

More recently, objectivity has faced especially intense scrutiny from journalists themselves. Debates over coverage of police brutality against Black Americans, in addition to difficulties faced by journalists who cover Donald Trump, have, over the past decade, led to public debate over what objectivity is and whether journalists should aim for it. In these recent discussions, objectivity is understood to include both Lippmann's scientific virtues and a host of related principles and rules. For instance, many younger journalists protest rules that bar journalists from sharing their political affiliations or attending protests, as well as objecting to editorial standards that mandate a dry and detached tone, on the grounds that they conceal bias rather than defraying it. Journalist Wesley Lowery, for instance, holds that what mainstream news journalism considers "objective truth [is] decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses" and argues instead for mainstream news journalism to adopt "moral clarity" as one of its standards.[8]

Some concessions have been granted by newsroom leadership, and some editorial leaders, most prominently Leonard Downie Jr., former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, argue for the move away from objectivity as a governing value.[9] However, the debates over how journalists ought to see their own role have only intensified. This discourse is largely conducted on social media and through op-eds and essays.[10] It has so far not been matched by philosophical analysis—a gap we aim to address in this article.

7 Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense*, 186 (quoted in Feighery, "A 'Moral Challenge'," 129).

8 Lowery, "A Reckoning over Objectivity."

9 Downie, "Newsrooms that Move Beyond 'Objectivity' Can Build Trust."

10 See Allsop, "Both Sides"; Lowery, "A Reckoning over Objectivity"; Greenberg, "The War on Objectivity in American Journalism"; Crook, "To Regain Trust, the News Media Need

2. OBJECTIVITY DEFINED

2.1. Objectivity as a Value

Theorists of objectivity have long disputed just what objectivity in journalism means. Lippmann clearly equated journalistic and scientific objectivity, a position that continues to find some supporters.[11] Other defenders of objectivity accept critiques of the scientific conception, especially since it depends on a positivistic view of truth, reality, and scientific inquiry that fell out of favor over the course of the twentieth century. In place of a scientific conception of objectivity, defenders (as well as some critics concerned to target their critique precisely) point to a range of features of objective journalism, not all of which seem to fit together neatly.[12]

Our preferred analysis—of both a significant portion of the discourse around objectivity and of the practices that sustain its place in mainstream news journalism—is that objectivity is best understood as a *value*. Objectivity, when achieved, is taken by its defenders to be a quality that makes journalistic work good *qua* journalistic work, and its absence, in turn, makes journalistic work bad *qua* journalistic work. The pursuit of this value, in turn, can be understood in terms of a set of distinct principles, compliance with which is meant to secure objectivity.

This distinction between objectivity as a value and the principles that it generates helps us to understand attributions of objectivity to journalists as well as the journalistic work they are involved in producing. Someone who complies with the principles (or avoids flouting them) may be said to be acting or working objectively, and someone who is disposed to comply with the principles (and is disposed to avoid flouting them) may be said to be an objective journalist. But the primary target of our analysis in this section and the next—and the primary locus for objectivity as we understand it—is journalistic work.[13]

Objectivity"; Downie, "Newsrooms that Move Beyond 'Objectivity' Can Build Trust"; Baron, "We Want Objective Judges and Doctors"; Sulzberger, "Journalism's Essential Value."

11 See Ryan, "Journalistic Ethics, Objectivity, Existential Journalism, Standpoint Epistemology, and Public Journalism." For a critique of this acceptance of a scientific model of objectivity in journalism, see Rosen, "Beyond Objectivity."

12 One point of dispute is whether neutrality should be understood as part of objectivity. See White, who argues against conflating neutrality and objectivity ("Objectivity as a Journalistic Virtue"). We agree that these notions should not be conflated as *equivalent*, but norms of neutrality are clearly part of the conception of objectivity that its defenders deploy. See below.

13 We therefore agree in part with White, who states that "objectivity … applies primarily to reports and only secondarily to people" ("Objectivity as a Journalistic Virtue," 18). We

Importantly, throughout our discussion we hold that journalistic work should not be identified solely with the characteristic products of journalism, i.e., news stories in one or another medium. Rather, journalism is an activity that involves all aspects of the selection and presentation of such news stories. Fact-checking, headline writing, and copyediting are all journalism. So is the editorial work of putting together an issue of a magazine or a broadcast news program. Journalistic work does not, however, extend to public statements or political activity that journalists undertake outside their professional competence.

We are now in a position to take up some of the central principles of objectivity, which often feature in the discourse around objectivity in mainstream news journalism. As we show in the next section, when mainstream news journalism is practiced in a way that takes these principles to be requirements for the production of good journalistic work, the democratic goals of such journalism are undermined. For now, however, we present these principles in terms that should be acceptable to objectivity's defenders and that reflect the language commonly used by journalists in newsrooms as well as by theorists of objectivity analyzing the practice of mainstream news journalism.

2.2. Three Principles of Objectivity for Mainstream News Journalism

The first principle of objectivity we discuss is the *"just the facts" principle*, which holds that objective journalism should reflect the facts of the matter under discussion rather than a particular interpretation of those facts. This principle reflects a specific view of the democratic goals that objectivity is meant to promote: news journalism should acquaint readers, as citizens of their polities, with important events that shape public and political life, and it should do so without, for example, presupposing or implying further views of how best to respond to these events or how to integrate them into political thinking and deliberation. This principle is taken as foundational to objective journalism by Carrie Figdor, whose view we discuss in more detail below.[14]

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disagree that this must imply that objectivity and neutrality are wholly distinct. See the previous note.

14 See Figdor, "Is Objective News Possible?" and "Objectivity in the News." This principle reflects one of the main ways that Jay Rosen understands objectivity: as a separation between facts and values, "or information from opinion, or news from views" ("Beyond Objectivity," 49). It is also central to Lippmann's scientific conception of objectivity, which is developed and discussed further in Ryan, "Journalistic Ethics, Objectivity, Existential Journalism, Standpoint Epistemology, and Public Journalism." White's analysis of objectivity as a journalistic virtue likewise draws on Lippmann but uses the notion of *discretion* to pick out this dimension of objectivity: "An objective report is a report that leaves little at all and nothing of importance to the discretion of the reporter" ("Objectivity as a Journalistic Virtue," 16). That is why, as White goes on to say, "the paradigms of objective

The second principle of objectivity we discuss is closely related to the first and may be called the *principle of positional neutrality*. Positional neutrality holds that objective news journalism should not favor one side in a political debate over another.[15] Attempts to ensure compliance with this principle can extend into regulation of journalists' behavior outside their journalistic work. For instance, some news organizations bar reporters from expressing partisan affiliations or even from voting. However, the principle itself applies in the first instance to favoring a position or a partisan political perspective within journalistic work.

The third principle of objectivity we discuss is more difficult to succinctly describe, but we refer to it as the *principle of dispassionate rhetoric*. A common way of expressing this principle is to say that objective journalism should not employ language that is designed or even likely to induce an emotional reaction in readers. More precisely, the principle of dispassionate rhetoric binds journalists to "informing" readers rather than, say, impressing or frightening them, or indeed accomplishing any number of other goals a speaker or writer may have.

These three principles of objectivity can be well illustrated by paradigmatic violations, which may coincide in a given case. Consider a news article concerning the release of an employment report from a government agency. An article that complies with the principles of objectivity would likely state the key facts and figures in the report, as well as perhaps taking note of selected responses from political leaders to the report or further economic analysis from outside experts. Suppose that the news article goes on to claim without evidence that the report proves that the government's policies are leading to economic harm. Such a claim would violate the "just the facts" principle. Likewise, suppose that the article advocates for the political opposition to be given the chance to implement its favored policies in place of the government's; here, the principle of positional neutrality would be clearly violated. Finally, let us suppose that the article, in the voice of the news journalist, describes the evidence of the report as a "disaster" or "ruinous" for the welfare of the nation. Such emotive language,

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reporting are the transcript of a speech, the telephone book, and the stock market prices"; hence, we should understand discretion in terms of reporting just what happened in "some specified event" rather than as anything added by the journalist (16).

15 This principle reflects two more of the ways that Rosen takes objectivity to be discussed within journalism ("Beyond Objectivity"). The first is in terms of "objectivity as balance," which Rosen takes to be the result of following "a set of professional routines and procedures" (49). The second is in the conception of objectivity that Rosen describes as "disinterested truth," which embraces both the first principle—of presenting just the facts so that we can collectively deliberate about the rest—and this second principle, insofar as journalists should not tip the scales in presenting such disinterested truths (51).

likely to stoke fear or worry in readers about their futures, would violate the principle of dispassionate rhetoric.

The undesirability of such violations of the principles of objectivity for the practice of mainstream news journalism may lead us to think that these principles are requirements for the production of good journalistic work. We argue below that these principles, though their adoption may be grounded in reasonable concerns, should not, in fact, be regarded as requirements but rather be regarded as rules of thumb that should be set aside when they conflict with the pursuit of mainstream news journalism's democratic goals.

3. THE SELF-UNDERMINING PURSUIT OF OBJECTIVITY

As noted above, the three principles of objectivity that we have identified typically operate in journalistic practice in concert with each other. We consider each of them separately in this section in order to demonstrate the ways in which journalists who take compliance with these principles to be required in order to produce good journalistic work actually end up undermining the broader democratic goals of journalism.

First, we consider the "just the facts" principle. The first point to make is that mainstream news journalism faces restrictions on space, time, and reader attention, which make communicating facts without interpretation impossible. Even journalists who strive to comply with the principles of objectivity must make judgments about what is newsworthy, prioritize some stories over others, and craft a sea of facts into a coherent narrative. These tasks are all fundamentally interpretive. Nor are these tasks incidental to the work of journalists, a useful crutch that could be dispensed with in some more ideal form of journalistic communication. Rather, the restrictions faced by mainstream news journalism are *constitutive* ones that help define the basic task that faces its practitioners.

Carrie Figdor argues, to the contrary, that the inevitability of such interpretative tasks as part of mainstream news journalism is consistent with adhering to the "just the facts" principle. In Figdor's view, every statement in an objective news report must be objectively verified such that it is "rational to believe on the basis of evidence that anyone should accept."[16] Figdor further argues that editing, even if it is value laden, can be based on objectively verifiable values; editing judgments are acceptably objective "if it is rational to make that judgment on the basis of reasons that anyone should accept."[17] The facts relevant

16 Figdor, "Is Objective News Possible?" 153.

17 Figdor, "Is Objective News Possible?" 159.

to such objective judgments include "facts about audience issues and values," other top stories of the day, the quality of a story's sourcing, and so on.[18]

However, Figdor's argument oversimplifies the editorial filter. First, assessing the values and interests of one's audience in mainstream news journalism requires a robust account of not only the individual needs and wants of one's audience but also their political agency and context. For instance, although audiences might not antecedently want to read about foreign wars instead of, say, reading the comics or a feel-good feature story, good editors might choose to give such international coverage prominent placement in order to inform citizens, on the ground that they should be in a position to hold their leaders to account for their decisions concerning the war. Deciding what is important for citizens to know is not a task that can be completed without a robust—and potentially controversial—account of democratic life and its values.[19] These values need not be universally held or meet the criterion of objectivity Figdor identifies. Mainstream news journalism must strike a balance between what an audience needs to hear and what it wants to hear, which requires a form of political judgment that may not receive unanimous consent.

Some critics portray the impossibility of high-quality "just the facts" journalism as a rebuttal to objectivity as a whole. However, objectivity's defenders may reasonably reply that while complying fully with the "just the facts" principle is not entirely possible, journalists still ought to try to conform their journalistic work as much as possible to this standard.[20] We agree with the underlying idea that mainstream news journalism ought to avoid inessential editorialization or excessive subjectivity. Where we depart from the defenders of objectivity is in treating compliance with the "just the facts" principle as a requirement for the production of good journalistic work.

Indeed, the predictable consequence of ruling out *all* interpretive activity as appropriate for the practice of mainstream news journalism is that only facts that *appear* to be devoid of interpretation will be left to ground journalistic work. That prediction is reflected in journalistic practice: in the face of time and resource constraints in the practice of mainstream news journalism, reporters frequently turn instead to government informational bureaucracies, which

18 Figdor, "Is Objective News Possible?" 159.

19 In this regard, our view of mainstream news journalism has an affinity to the "fourth estate" model of the press, on which helping to set the agenda for public discussion is a role that the press plays as part of a democratic political system. We postpone to section 4 a more detailed discussion of this political role.

20 For instance, David Greenberg argues that "the impossibility of pure objectivity is not an excuse for collapsing into subjectivity" ("The War on Objectivity in American Journalism").

present apparently interpretation-free facts in press releases and news conferences. As sociologist Mark Fishman writes in his account of one local newsroom, in most cases, "Officials have and give the facts, reporters get them."[21] If they take the "just the facts" principle to be a requirement for producing good journalistic work, journalists end up prioritizing written records, government press releases, and police reports. This avoidance of interpretation frequently leads journalists to simply repeat the government interpretation of events as produced by government informational bureaucracies.

In their analysis of fake news, Jessica Pepp, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel Sterken write that following standard journalistic practices offers "no guarantee of reliability," specifically calling out cases in which reporters are "fed a line by government sources with their own agendas."[22] Although they view these cases as distinct from instances of fake news, which are not produced with standard journalistic practices, they nevertheless acknowledge weaknesses in these practices that may make mainstream news journalism pieces untrustworthy. In particular, because of constitutive constraints on time and resources available to fact-check sources, reporters may be led astray by such sources because of their efforts to abide by the "just the facts" principle, which privileges official and governmentally sourced information.

The practice of relying on such bureaucracies in fact frequently distorts the facts of the matter and, most crucially for our purposes, undermines journalism's democratic role of holding those in power to account, since such government sources get the first—and often the last—say in framing events. A useful example is provided by the US news media's collective response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a fast-moving crisis during which statements by public health officials (such as official recommendations early on in the pandemic to eschew masking) were regularly echoed without being subjected to adequate scrutiny.[23] As we argue in the next section, informing the public does not require eschewing interpretation or hewing to the "just the facts" principle. But a revised conception of the relationship between mainstream news journalism and political debate and deliberation is needed to see why that is so.

21 Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*, 145.

22 Pepp et al., "What's New About Fake News?" 76. See also Michaelson et al., "Relevance-Based Knowledge Resistance in Public Conversations."

23 As Peter Kafka notes, "when it came to grappling with a new disease they knew nothing about, journalists most often turned to experts and institutions for information, and relayed what those experts and institutions told them to their audience" even though some of that information proved "to be inaccurate or up for debate" ("What Went Wrong with the Media's Coronavirus Coverage?").

Next, we consider positional neutrality, the principle that bars journalists from favoring one partisan view or another. This principle binds journalists across many beats but is perhaps strongest in national political coverage. The problems generated by adherence to positional neutrality are twofold. Like "just the facts" reporting, complete positional neutrality is unachievable since certain facts often support the argument of one side over the other, and different contextual presentations are favored by different partisan sides. Moreover, in working to comply with this principle, journalists end up distorting the very facts of the matter they ultimately need to communicate to the citizenry. In cases in which one partisan group or actor has shortcomings, news journalists who take positional neutrality to be a requirement for their work end up presenting a faulty balance to their readers.

To understand the ways in which good-faith efforts to comply with positional neutrality lead reporters into so-called both-sidesism, we consider a recent example in US politics: the first 2020 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, moderated by Chris Wallace of Fox News. Prior to the debate, Wallace articulated his view of his role: to be "as invisible as possible," letting the partisan politicians speak for themselves.[24] But when reporters simply present "both sides" without commentary, they open their platforms to abuse by bad-faith arguments, as happened in that debate. In trying to avoid the appearance of favoring any one political side, journalists end up elevating lies, slander, and arguments made in bad faith, simply because they are made by political actors.[25]

Aspiring to positional neutrality not only risks amplifying bad-faith actors to the detriment of readers; it can also lead the press itself to distort the facts. One example can be found in a *New York Times* story on Trump's first impeachment, which framed congressional debate in terms of antipathy on "both sides"—the phrase itself was used four times in the article—and mostly avoided discussion of the facts underlying the impeachment.[26] In its very aspiration to political neutrality, this story tipped the scales, distorting the facts of the matter and leading its readers into a false understanding of the source of the polarization. These examples are not isolated but a recurring feature of mainstream news journalism in a highly polarized era featuring norm-breaking politicians such as Trump. In brief, a false aspiration to partisan balance favors bad faith or extremist political arguments by elevating them and distorts the facts—and the deliberative landscape—for citizens.

24 Allsop and Vernon, "How the Press Covered the Last Four Years of Trump."

25 This weakness of "neutral" journalism to bad-faith actors has been taken advantage of by politicians since at least Joe McCarthy, who employed similar tactics to great success with the mainstream news journalism of the 1950s. See Feighery, "A 'Moral Challenge.'"

26 See Allsop, "Both Sides."

Finally, we consider the principle of dispassionate rhetoric. Journalists who take themselves to be bound by this principle aspire to inform their readers without provoking any particular emotional affect. Yet mainstream news journalism is tasked with covering current events, to which emotional reactions are often unavoidable. Indeed, many factual descriptions of events are themselves laden with value and emotional affect. The words 'murder', 'lie', and 'insurrection', for instance, are both strongly value-laden words and also factual descriptions. Hence, the decision to not use such words and substitute them with less emotionally charged ones is also a decision that manipulates readers' emotions by blunting the impact of a story and its underlying facts.

When journalists in such cases use dispassionate rhetoric at the expense of more accurate descriptions, they end up sanitizing events, censoring language, or excluding factual details that might provoke emotion. These are the characteristic consequences of taking the principle of dispassionate rhetoric to be a requirement for producing good journalistic work. Take the common phrase 'officer-involved shooting', which is used by police departments across the United States and mimicked by newspapers at every level. From the phrase, it is entirely unclear how an officer was involved in the shooting, although the phrase is used almost exclusively to refer to police officers shooting nonofficers; it thereby functions on multiple levels to obscure the actor(s) and to blunt the emotional impact of such shootings.[27] In trying to avoid provoking emotional reactions in their readers, journalists end up distorting the basic facts they are tasked with communicating.

4. AN ALTERNATIVE: JOURNALISM AS A FORM OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL AGENCY

We have argued that a common feature of all of the principles of objectivity discussed above is that treating compliance with them as a requirement for producing good journalistic work predictably frustrates the democratic goals of journalism—namely, informing readers about issues of social and political importance and holding the powerful to account.[28] Hence, practitioners of

27 For a detailed account of the meaning and usage of the term 'officer-involved shooting' and its effect on perceptions of police responsibility, see Conklin, "Officer-Involved Shootings."

28 See also Curran, who adds to these two goals a third—namely, representing public opinion ("Mass Media and Democracy Revisited," cited in Fox, "Public Reason, Objectivity, and Journalism in Liberal Democratic Societies"). We set aside the latter as being of lesser importance. We agree with Fox that these goals are not only political but also "critical tasks in a modern democratic society" ("Public Reason, Objectivity, and Journalism in Liberal Democratic Societies," 259).

mainstream news journalism who take themselves to be bound by the principles of objectivity in the way discussed above face a dilemma. They must either undermine the democratic aims of the practice or give up on the aspiration to objectivity.

Like other critics of objectivity in mainstream news journalism, we hold that journalists ought to do the latter. What is distinctive of our analysis, however, is that we take the dilemma to arise because the broader culture that sustains mainstream news journalism has the democratic goals in view and takes objectivity as a necessary means of achieving these goals. In our view, then, the dilemma is not simply an artifact of a misguided attachment to a flawed ideal but the product of mainstream news journalism's good-faith attempt to achieve its goals, which we take to be worthwhile. Accordingly, we take ourselves to have a further task beyond simply recommending the jettisoning of objectivity. We aim now to develop an alternative conception of mainstream news journalism that shows how journalists can fulfill the democratic goals of mainstream news journalism without committing to objectivity as a master value. We undertake that task in this section.

In the course of articulating a positive vision for mainstream news journalism, we also lay the groundwork to address one of the most serious criticisms of mainstream news journalism as a practice, which is that it functions merely as propaganda or as the presentation of the perspective of social and political elites. Inasmuch as our positive conception takes the democratic goals of mainstream news journalism as worthwhile even while departing from the ideology of objectivity, it must meet this criticism. In the following section, we develop this response further alongside responses to objections from classical liberal defenders of objectivity and from proponents of a more straightforwardly activist model of journalism that we likewise reject.

In place of Lippman's conception of mainstream news journalism as a kind of impartial quasi-scientific investigation of social reality, as well as this conception's less scientific but still unworkable descendants, we propose a new conception of mainstream news journalism as a form of *democratic political agency* that is essentially devoted to preserving the communicative conditions of democratic life itself. The practitioners of mainstream news journalism, under our conception, should not see themselves as separate or independent from the political community. Rather, they should recognize that democratic life requires a citizenry that can hold their political representatives and other leaders to account, that can assess those leaders' performance intelligently, and that is open to learning about social, scientific, and technological changes that bear on their shared life. Such journalists should see themselves as working to foster and preserve these dimensions of democratic life through the communicative task of news journalism.

This conception resembles Susanna Siegel's account of salience principles, though we offer a more general framework.[29] Siegel argues that journalists ought to produce journalism in a way that displays the public as "potential political protagonists," providing an account that emphasizes the stake the public has in the subject of the journalism and the way citizens can affect outcomes.[30] As Siegel notes, in reality, the public often has no prior interest in much of the information that they need to be well-informed democratic citizens and actors. Siegel's view treats citizens not simply as passive consumers of information but as potential contributors to political life. Our conception of journalism as a form of political agency enlarges this to a broader mandate to preserve and promote the communicative culture of democracy. This task may well include treating the public as potential political protagonists.

Nevertheless, practitioners of mainstream news journalism should not aim to advance a particular policy agenda or act as part of or in concert with interest or advocacy groups. In this regard, journalists might be compared to civil servants working within an administrative bureaucracy who are tasked with providing information to political actors, except that mainstream news journalism's first responsibility is to the public as a whole. While journalists labor outside the formal apparatus of the state, their work of information gathering, interpretation, and pursuing accountability is an essential part of how a modern democratic society achieves the collective self-knowledge that underpins effective public deliberation and problem-solving. Therefore, we should regard the practice of mainstream news journalism as a form of democratic political agency. What mainstream news journalism needs, then, is to recover not Lippman's ideal of objectivity but rather the ideal of democracy held by his contemporary (and philosophical adversary) John Dewey—that is, democracy as "conjoint communicated experience."[31]

Party politics, by contrast, typically involves the pursuit of policy goals in light of a specific vision of the polity, alongside accumulating power for party leaders and, frequently, promoting the interests of their members. We hold that practitioners of mainstream news journalism should see themselves as above the fray of partisan politics in their professional work. Nevertheless, practitioners of mainstream news journalism should regard themselves as aiming to foster and preserve the dimensions of democratic life noted above and hence as political actors of a sort. Indeed, our conception highlights the important truth that practitioners of mainstream news journalism are a vital part of our

29 Siegel, "Salience Principles for Democracy."

30 Siegel, "Salience Principles for Democracy," 150.

31 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 87.

political system. This system should be understood to represent a way of democratic life that goes beyond partisan political competition and even the broader contestations of principled policy debate.

In short, we hold that mainstream news journalism aims to make possible the clear-eyed contestation of competing visions of the polity without engaging directly in this contestation, but this activity is still a form of political agency because of its democratic goals.

How exactly can news journalists remain above the fray of partisan politics while advancing the democratic goals of mainstream news journalism? A useful example may be drawn from debates over single-payer health care in the United States (often described by its proponents as "Medicare for all"). Partisan debates on this topic involve and sometimes directly invoke complex empirical questions, such as the prediction that the implementation of a single-payer government system along the lines of Canada's would drive down health care costs overall while maintaining quality of service. But these debates have frequently also been conducted in more emotive terms with competing slogans, both from advocates who offer the reassurance that "you can keep your doctor" and from critics who argue against a "government takeover" of health care.[32]

In the case of such a debate, the role of mainstream news journalism in relation to the democratic goal of informing the citizenry is twofold: (1) to scrutinize the implicit and explicit empirical claims made by partisan political actors and (2) to relate these claims to the frequently implicit value commitments of partisan actors who seek to advance a specific vision of the polity. In relation to the democratic goal of holding politicians accountable, the specific role of mainstream news journalism might, for instance, involve identifying private interests that may influence or shape these arguments, such as the work of industry lobbyists who fund politicians and parties. In pursuing each of these tasks, news journalists are aiming not to advance any particular concrete policy options but rather to enable citizens to reflect on the options, to clarify for themselves what matters to them, and to hold their leaders to account, compelling them to speak the truth and to pursue the common good above any private interests. Moreover, they should aim to allow the actual contestation of competing visions of the polity to occur within the public sphere.

This conception of mainstream news journalism as democratic political agency can be further clarified by taking up and responding to objections on behalf of other views of mainstream news journalism, ranging from classic liberal

32 See Jayapal, "It's Time for Democrats to Get Their Facts Right on Medicare-for-All"; and Parks and Phelps, "Bernie Sanders Relaunches His Medicare-for-All Health Care Legislation."

defenses of objectivity to views of mainstream news journalism as a type of activism or as merely a form of propaganda; this we do in the following section.

5. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

5.1. The Propaganda Objection

First, we consider the criticism of mainstream news journalism posed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*. According to the propaganda model that Herman and Chomsky propose, mainstream news journalism functions primarily as propaganda for social and political elites—in particular, for the government. This propaganda effect emerges not from explicit governmental or elite instruction as to the content, tone, and angle of coverage but rather from the inculcation of elite norms and values within journalists themselves. Various "filters"—including newspapers' profit motive and reliance on advertisers, the need to maintain source relationships, and the threats of powerful enforcers who retaliate against newspapers for negative coverage—lead to mainstream news journalism advocating for elite interests, contravening democracy rather than promoting it.

This account poses a strong criticism of mainstream news journalism, especially mainstream journalistic coverage of international events and American foreign policy. Herman and Chomsky rightly criticize an overreliance on government narratives and sources who hold societal authority—a concern we share. However, they go too far in denying the actual ability of mainstream news journalism to hold power to account, viewing instances of government-critical coverage as rare exceptions.[33] Such a view is an inadequate account of the real ways in which journalism checks the most powerful through reporting, the impact of which has been documented on large and small scales by numerous nonprofits.[34] These are not merely cases of some reporters defying widespread norms: the existence of independent news outlets reporting on political matters has been linked to decreased corruption, more electoral competition, and better voter turnout.[35] Chomsky and Herman themselves spend extensive time discussing the ways in which PR officials and government spokespeople outnumber and

33 Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, xxxii.

34 See, e.g., the work of the Fund for Investigative Journalism as described on their webpage "Impact," https://fij.org/impact/.

35 See Campante and Do, "Isolated Capital Cities, Accountability, and Corruption"; Rubado and Jennings, "Political Consequences of the Endangered Local Watchdog"; and Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, "Do Newspapers Matter?" For an overview of more relevant literature, see Darr, "Local News Coverage Is Declining."

overpower journalists, concerns that make sense only if journalists have some real capacity and responsibility that go beyond that of being elite PR professionals.

While we share many of Chomsky and Herman's concerns, their theory does not adequately address the ways in which mainstream news journalism can hold power to account and uphold democratic goals. By moving beyond the ideology of objectivity, we can address some of their concerns around journalism's intense reliance on the government while accounting for the critical democratic role of mainstream news journalism.

5.2. *The Activist Objection*

Since we advocate giving up on objectivity as a master value for mainstream news journalism, our view may seem to collapse into the activist view of mainstream news journalism. Defenders of such a view hold that journalists ought to see themselves as engaged in political activism—or at least that journalists ought to be *able* to engage in such activism, especially on behalf of or as representatives of marginalized communities in the social and political sphere. On the basis of this view, one might object that we have stopped short of a full embrace of the normative ideal of journalists as engaged citizens devoted to combating injustice.

A helpful way to address this objection is to take up Stephen Ward's view of democratically engaged journalism, which shares many of the features of our conception of mainstream news journalism, especially in rejecting a posture of detachment.[36] Nevertheless, we hold that Ward's view brings mainstream news journalism too close to explicitly activist forms of journalism. Ward considers objective journalism and activist journalism as lying on a spectrum rather than as being distinguished in kind. Hence, he is able to locate democratically engaged journalism between these extremes. Despite Ward's attempt to chart a middle course, he identifies combating extremism as one of the goals of such democratically engaged journalism. We consider this goal to stand outside the remit of mainstream news journalism as a form of democratic political agency.

Of course, insofar as extremists advocate misinforming the citizenry or preventing political accountability, practitioners of mainstream news journalism under our conception should confidently identify these attempts and highlight their inconsistency with prevailing democratic norms. Moreover, since we do not hold that mainstream news journalism requires the pursuit of positional neutrality, its practitioners can go further and refuse to characterize antidemocratic extremist views as simply one side among many. In other words, practitioners of mainstream news journalism should not be afraid to describe extremism as extremism (albeit with due caution, given the habit of partisan political actors

36 See especially Ward, "Democratically Engaged Journalism and Extremism."

to label their opponents views as extremist in a politically polarized context). This approach lets journalists give citizens appropriate information to make decisions about an extremist party or policy, in service of the health of the polity.

Adopting goals such as fighting extremism might seem like a natural extension of such blunt coverage, but in reality, doing so interferes with journalists' overarching aims of information gathering, interpretation, and accountability. Pursuing the goal of fighting extremism might, for instance, lead a journalist to curtail their coverage of the flaws of antiextremist parties in order to avoid weakening the extremists' opponents; or it might entail reporting bad-faith arguments made against the extremists and covering them as though they had value. Those behaviors wrongly deprive citizens of relevant information and thereby undermine the democratic goals of mainstream news journalism. Therefore, combating extremism on a political level should not be an avowed goal of mainstream news journalism either.

In sum, we agree with Ward that mainstream news journalism ought to be governed by its democratic goals rather than by the false idol of objectivity. However, Ward's framing of democratically engaged journalism as resembling activist journalism leads him not to see the alternative we have identified. In order to aim at the common good rather than the good of particular groups, journalists must eschew some of the forms of direct political engagement that activists practice.

5.3. The Liberal Objection

Finally, many liberal defenders of objectivity argue that journalists still ought to aspire to objectivity despite the failures we identify above. While perfect compliance with principles of objectivity is widely accepted as unachievable, its defenders still argue that such compliance is a worthy aspiration.[37] Recent defenses offer numerous reasons for continuing to accept objectivity, from the practical (holding to objectivity is a good way to gain readers' trust) to the pedagogical (holding to objectivity inculcates epistemic humility).[38] We here consider and respond to one of the most common arguments in favor of objectivity.

Liberal defenders of objectivity often argue that objectivity is the only or best "epistemological safeguard" against partisanship and bias, a perspective that obliges journalists to "identify bias and think critically about it" and compels newsrooms to introduce safeguards against partisanship.[39] This is the primary concern of David Greenberg, who sees objectivity's "antiseptic tone" and

37 Examples of the many lengthy defenses of principles of objectivity include Greenberg, "The War on Objectivity in American Journalism"; and Sulzberger, "Journalism's Essential Value."

38 For the former, see Crook, "To Regain Trust, the News Media Need Objectivity." For the latter, see Baron, "We Want Objective Judges and Doctors."

39 Greenberg, "The War on Objectivity in American Journalism."

focus on informational verification as essential to staving off bias and subjectivity.[40] A. G. Sulzberger raises similar concerns in an essay on independence in journalism, writing that "the case for independent journalism is made stronger by the weakness of the alternatives."[41] Sulzberger, like Greenberg, sees flaws with the dominant philosophy of journalism and the ways in which the ideology of objectivity has been used in the past. Yet both see the principles of objectivity as critical for combating bias and avoiding a situation in which, in Sulzberger's words, "the facts [that activist reporters] discover sit in conflict with a larger political goal that they—or their employer—is committed to advancing."[42]

We share the liberal desire to guard against reporting in which the political commitments of journalists distort the facts they purport to discover. However, we respond that taking the principles of objectivity to be requirements for producing good journalistic work does not remove bias and may even, in some cases, obscure it. For while objectivity has long been equated with calls for unbiased work, there is no "neutral" use of language or way to arrange facts. As David Beaver and Jason Stanley argue, adopting a view of language as neutral obscures the reality that "words are always embedded in speech practices, which are elements of ideologies" and can even "mask . . . the way that speech essentially presents the world within a situated perspective."[43]

Indeed, precisely because it assumes that a neutral presentation of information is widely achievable, the single-minded pursuit of objectivity obscures subtler forms of bias in the work of news journalists—in what they report, in how they arrange information, and in the ways they develop editorial judgment. In particular, because editorial judgment is a subjective skill that involves judging the relative value, reliability, and importance of different narratives, objectivity fails to help reporters develop it and distinguish it from their own biases, values, and professional aims. The principles of objectivity at best serve as inexact rules of thumb to steer news journalists away from the most obvious forms of bias. But following these principles is no substitute for the development of editorial judgment, which requires an understanding of the ways that the democratic goals of news journalism may require violations of the principles.

Fortunately, theorists need not take objective journalism and activist journalism to be the only two philosophical options for mainstream news journalism. As our response to Ward above shows, our conception of journalism as a form of democratic political agency avoids the assumption of informational

40 Greenberg, "The War on Objectivity in American Journalism."

41 Sulzberger, "Journalism's Essential Value."

42 Sulzberger, "Journalism's Essential Value."

43 Beaver and Stanley, "Neutrality," 183.

neutrality as well as the pitfalls of pursuing objectivity. While we acknowledge the unique function of mainstream news journalism, our conception offers a way for news journalists to understand their own values and commitments without crudely bifurcating them into the valued skill of editorial judgment, on the one hand, and harmful biases, on the other. That is because our conception places news journalism's democratic goals at its center.

6. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF JOURNALISM

We have aimed here to remedy the relative lack of philosophical attention to a central concept in the practice of journalism—one that is the subject of considerable debate both within and outside journalism. In addressing ourselves to that debate, our hope is to contribute to an imaginative expansion concerning what journalism might be—one that goes beyond simply advocating for or rejecting objectivity. Yet there remain a number of related topics that warrant comparable scrutiny.

Some questions we invite further consideration of within philosophy include the following: How is mainstream news journalism related to editorial journalism? How should news organizations handle the division of labor between the editorial and reported dimensions of their work? How should practitioners of mainstream news journalism articulate their democratic goals to their audience? How do the principles of mainstream news journalism apply in a multinational or global context? What place does nonprofit or governmentally funded journalism have in a context where most news organizations are run for profit? How does the rise of citizen journalism change the definition of journalism and the scope of journalistic ethics? What are the proper modes of accountability between and among readers, journalists, and news organizations? Addressing these further questions will help to develop the burgeoning field of the philosophy of journalism.[44]

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